DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 216 028 TM 820 181

AUTHOR Jensen, Arthur R.
TITLE Political Ideologies and Educational Research.
PUB DATE 20 Mar 82
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (66th, New York, NY, March 19-23, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Research; Nature Nurture Controversy; *Political Influences; Power Structure; *Research Problems; Social Science Research; Sociology
IDENTIFIERS *Marxist Approach; *Objectivity; Sociology of Science

ABSTRACT

There is a growing awareness among scientists and researchers in every field that the selection of problems for research, the guiding theories, the interpretation of evidence, and resulting conclusions can be, and in fact often are, shaped by political or social ideology. If infused with keenly critical vigilance, such awareness affords the best safeguard to the integrity of research workers. Researchers need not be helpless puppets of one or another social ideology. Indeed, the work of researchers is justified only in its ability to fulfill the ideal of scientific objectivity. The purpose and products of research fulfill a potentially valuable role in society by exerting a unique and independent force in the political scene. The heredity-environment issue can provide a test case of the Marxist sociology of science. The evidence for this test case refutes the notion that the conclusions of research in the human sciences only reflect the ideology of the groups in power. (Author/BW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED216028

POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Arthur R. Jensen

Institute of Human Learning

University of California, Berkeley

Paper presented in Division G symposium, "Neoconservatism Response to Futures in Education and Research," at the annual convention of the American Educational Research Association, New York City, March 20, 1982.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

A. R. Jensen

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

TM 820 181

POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Arthur R. Jensen

University of California, Berkeley

Recently, the New York Times editorialized as follows: "Politicians use sociologists in much the same way as trial lawyers use psychologists: to prove their point with expert testimony that best serves their purpose. The goal therefore is to find the expert who comes up with the desired findings" (quoted by Lewis, 1982).

There is a growing awareness among scientists and researchers in every field that the selection of problems for research, the guiding theories, the interpretation of evidence, and the resulting conclusions can be, and in fact often are, shaped by political or social ideology. This increased awareness, in my view, deserves to be applauded. If infused with keenly critical vigilance, such awareness affords the best safeguard to our integrity as research workers. That is the essence of my plea, which is that, as researchers, we need not be helpless puppets of one or another social ideology, wittingly or unwittingly shaping our research to reinforce its dogmas. Indeed, my thesis is that our justification as researchers should be measured by our effort and ability to conduct research which aims primarily to fulfill the ideal of scientific objectivity. I view the purpose and products of research as fulfilling a potentially much more valuable role in society by exerting a unique and independent force--what might be termed the Reality Principle--in the political scene than it could ever have by allying itself with this

or that political philosophy, or by becoming merely a tool for furthering a preordained social ideology.

This view of research as an independent force was essentially the viewpoint of the great pioneers of educational research, figures such as Pestalozzi, Stanley Hall, Judd, and Thorndike, who were imbued with the idea that the general methods of scientific investigation, with their chief aim of objectivity, should be applied to the problem of education. I am not willing to abandon their ideal. It has seemed to me to be so intrinsic in the development of the field of educational research that I can hardly conceive of a philosophy of research which is not based on the assumption that a reality exists out there with respect to many of the variables involved in the educational process which is independent of any currently prevailing political philosophy, and which is amenable to discovery and understanding by the methods of objective science.

In a free society, the prevailing political philosophies and policies can be subject to change, at times almost overnight. So I shall not here be concerned with any specific brand of political thought, whether it be radical, conservative, neo-conservative, liberal, libertarian, Marxist, or wherever it may be located on the ideological spectrum from the Extreme Left to the Extreme Right. Rather, I am emphasizing the view that researchers' primary concern should be in discovering and representing the educational realities that prevail despite shifting politics and policies. Then research, as a stable and dependable source of objective knowledge, may hope to gain the respect and the power to influence policy in the only way it legitimately can--as dependable knowledge. Researchers, as researchers, must strive to yield objective research-based information which will act as ballast for

the ship of education in the tossing sea of political vicissitude.

This is not to say that scientists, educators, and educational researchers should be political eunuchs. Like all other citizens, they will have their own political values. But what I think is absolutely essential is that educational researchers (and indeed all researchers in the behavioral and social sciences) must take special pains to guard against the corruption of their true mission by allowing advocacy of a political or social ideology to masquerade as research-based knowledge. Disregard for this danger, or an insufficiency of self-imposed vigilance, discredits research and makes a mockery of its basic philosophic justification, which I have termed the Reality Principle, i.e., the idea that it is possible to obtain scientifically objective knowledge about the nature of man and of society and of the educational process, rather than having to rely merely on dogmatic beliefs dictated by political ideology. If educational researchers fail to heed the ideal of the objective Reality Principle which is the unique justification for their activity, public backlash against what is perceived as ideology in the guise of social and educational research can be counted on, and with justification. A small example of this was sharply voiced in a recent letter-to-the-editor of Science: "Does anyone remember any social scientist who ever complained when his or her funding was based on social philosophy, back in those lush days of the New Frontier and the Great Society? I don't. Did any social scientist ever suggest that the government was ignorant, arrogant, or even dangerously dogmatic when it poured money into the research of social scientists who never tired of telling us that redistribution of wealth would cure social injustice, disease, illiteracy, and crime? . . . The social sciences are in hot

water today because they were too willing to serve politically expedient philosophies yesterday. They took the money and ran, without caring one whit about the ultimate consequences" (Barchilon, 1981).

But poorly informed public opinion can also be at odds with the Reality Principle and affords a fickle and undependable basis for the guidance of research effort. It has been argued, for example, that Head Start is a large-scale educational program which has been motivated from the start, and sustained ever since, by wholly political forces, without any real influence by or on actual research. Two investigators of the history of Head Start, Caruso and Detterman (1981), stated the purpose of their study as follows: "We attempted to determine what we knew, when we knew it, and, more important, how this knowledge influenced policy decisions" (p. 183). Social ideology rather than research-based evidence had instigated Head Start and has maintained it virtually untouched by whatever sketchy objective data could be gleaned from it. Caruso and Detterman argue that Head Start expanded rapidly and extensively, without heed to research considerations, and instead drew its supposed scientific justification from what Caruso and Detterman call the "Joyce Brothers data base--ideas endorsed by the public at large but not necessarily supported by research" (p. 185). They note, "Even when research began to accumulate showing that Head Start was not having the desired effect, the response was to authorize additional funds." They concluded: "The massive sums that have been spent on Head Start have produced no increment in our knowledge of how to provide effective intervention. . . . We should not be concerned that many of the studies done in this area produce negative results. What should concern us is that we are no better at producing positive results than we were 25

years ago" (p. 186).

Political influence can creep into the ostensible research enterprise through various avenues: the particular selection of research topics, peer review of research grant proposals, biased selective use of data and biased interpretation of results, biased editorial review of journal articles, and biased or one-sided selection of book reviewers. These are only the least subtle avenues of corruption, against which we may be able to exert some conscious opposition.

I have no idea of their frequency, but now and then I come across people in the social sciences who impress me as being primarily concerned with bringing about a certain kind of social change and who view the aim of research as being just one more propaganda tool for achieving such change, rather than essentially as a means for discovering the nature of the key variables that must determine the feasibility of the desired change or the actual mechanisms that could make it possible. They implicitly believe in the possibility of changing human nature by legislation. Some others, apparently without any ideological axe to grind, may nevertheless press their ears to the ground for the political rumbles that signal the kinds of research proposals that are most apt to reap benefit to the researcher by their hidden promise of fulfilling a political aim. This theme might serve as a dissertation hypothesis for the study of the history of educational research during the era of the New Frontier and the Great Society.

Although I consider the shaping of research conclusions by political beliefs an anathema, I think it entirely proper that one's personal appraisal or acceptance of a political program should be importantly influenced by its cognizance of, and responsiveness to, the

information resulting from objective research. Why should one support any political philosophy based on notions that are decisively contradicted by scientific knowledge?

This brings us face to face with a fundamental question about research and ideology: Is there an objective reality--the grist for research--which can, in principle, be independent of political ideology, or does ideology dictate what the reality is?

The claim has been made that, especially in the behavioral and social sciences in which educational research is theoretically rooted, there is no possible distinction between scientific statements of fact and ideological statements of value. This is the idea propounded in recent years in the name of the "sociology of knowledge." It has become the keystone of the Marxist interpretation of science, which has found its most plausible application in the human sciences. It promotes the idea that there are no objective truths, at least not in the behavioral and social sciences, because what is regarded as truth is an inevitable product of the political and economic system, which reflects the social relationships and values dictated by the groups that control the means of production. Scientific theories and the interpretation of data, in this view, are inevitably shaped, wittingly or unwittingly, so as to serve the purpose of legitimizing the existing economic class structure. Hence, research in the human sciences is seen not as a search for objective knowledge but as a sociopolitical activity, reflecting the social context and value systems within which individual researchers do their work. According to this view, socio-economically conditioned presuppositions and prior prejudices about the nature of man and society force social scientists to produce theories and purported evidence which

inevitably confirm their social prejudices.

Although there may be some element of truth in this notion, I believe it has been greatly exaggerated, and has been essentially contradicted by empirical evidence. In the first place, errors, blind spots, and biases on the part of individual scientists have always existed in every scientific field. Yet over the course of time there has indisputably been scientific progress and the growth of objective knowledge in every sphere of scientific endeavor. The theory that science cannot be objective because it cannot escape the context of social values, of course, is itself not exempt from the same generalization. If this theme is overplayed, it places its advocate in a position not unlike that of the Greek philosopher's paradox of the Cretan who declared, "All Cretans always lie." If the statement is true, it must be untrue, and hence need not be taken seriously. Fortunately, progress in scientific knowledge is distilled out of the endeavors of the many individually imperfect scientists who investigate the same phenomenon. The enterprise succeeds in its aim of objectivity, in the long run, despite the subjective biases of individual scientists and despite the influence of social context as portrayed by the Marxist sociology of science. Mendel's theory is accepted and Lysenko's is rejected (even by the Soviet ideologues who once promoted it), not because one scientist was necessarily a better man than the other, but because there is indeed a reality out there in the realm of phenomena, a reality in terms of which theories can be criticized and tested by innumerable other scientists, albeit each with his or her own individual biases or blind spots, each scrutinizing and testing the others' formulations. One chief virtue of science is that, in order to succeed, its

practitioners need not be saints or paragons of detached objectivity. When many individual scientists--ordinary men and women with specialized technical competencies--are all able to think as they please and do their research unfettered by collectivist or totalitarian constraints, science is a self-correcting process.

In any case, the Marxist sociology of science cannot exempt the critic from a detailed analysis of any particular theory or empirical claim, showing precisely how it fails as objective science, or why it should be rejected and replaced by some competing formulation or body of evidence. That has always been the normal procedure of science, and we know that it works.

But can it really work with respect to those fields of research which deal with the nature of man, especially those behavioral aspects which must be taken account of in the educational enterprise? These aspects are continuously being discovered. Are there such basic elements entering into educational problems which may have an independent reality regardless of the prevailing political ideology?

Looking at this question from the viewpoint of my own interests with respect to psychological research that bears on educational problems, I would note that if there is a biological basis for individual differences in scholastic achievement, the observed variance in achievement, which seems to have largely resisted countless forms of educational intervention, can hardly be importantly influenced by social ideologies of whatever variety.

The so-called "IQ controversy" embraces questions, perennial questions that apparently will not go away, of the nature and measurement of mental abilities, the relative roles of heredity and environment in the

causation of individual and group differences in these abilities, and their educational and social importance. These matters are the favorite targets of those who espouse the Marxist "sociology of knowledge." They view the so-called "nature-nurture controversy" not as being a genuine question about reality, but as a political pseudo-question to which the Left and the Right will find only diametrically opposing answers, knowingly or unknowingly dictated by their respective ideologies and the contrasting social and economic systems to which they give rise. On the other hand, if there are independent realities concerning the nature of man which are objectively knowable through scientific research, then scientists working under even highly different and conflicting political, ideological, and economic systems would be expected to obtain highly similar findings and reach essentially the same conclusions in their research, provided, of course, that the conduct and publication of such research were not completely proscribed by a totalitarian system, as existed, for example, under Hitler and Stalin.

Hence, the heredity-environment issue, in a sense, can provide a test case of the Marxist sociology of science--whether, in the normal course of scientific research, scientists working with two highly differing ideological and economic systems will arrive at congruent or at contradictory findings and interpretations regarding the roles of heredity and environment in mental ability.

Evidence for this test case is now at hand. It unequivocally refutes the notion of the sociology of knowledge, i.e., that the conclusions of research in the human sciences only reflect the ideology of the groups in power. What do we find when actual scientists from quite differing political backgrounds, rather than political ideologues

masquerading as scientists, tackle a given problem, such as the heredity-environment question?

Recent research by scientists in the Soviet Union, Poland, East Germany, and other Communist countries, has addressed the heredity-environment issue with respect to differences in mental ability, and has overwhelmingly yielded evidence and conclusions which are virtually indistinguishable from those of behavioral-genetic researchers in capitalist countries. Both groups of scientists, working independently, find that the heritability of IQ is substantial, with most estimates falling between .60 and .80. (Heritability is the proportion of the total variance [i.e., individual differences] in a trait that is attributable to genetic factors.) One large-scale Soviet study (based on monozygotic and dizygotic twins), for example, found a heritability of .78 in the mental test scores of Moscow school children (Lipovechaja et al., 1978), a figure in excess of that (0.69) reported by Eysenck (1979, p. 115) from a reanalysis of all available Western data (excluding Cyril Burt's). (Burt's data on twins must be excluded, as their authenticity is at best questionable [see Jensen, 1981, pp. 124-127].) It is also noteworthy that in these Communist countries, which have emphasized complete egalitarianism in their school systems as well as in all their other social institutions, the variance of IQ is the same as in Western capitalist countries, and the same correlations are found between children's IQs and the occupational classifications of their parents. Similarly, the Communist researchers interpret these differences as largely attributable to genetic factors. (These and many other studies in this vein from Communist countries have been reviewed in more detail by Eysenck [in press].)

This and much other evidence, it seems to me, justifies a renewed enthusiasm for seeing educational research proceed on the working hypothesis that there exists an objective reality germane to the most fundamental processes of education, and that many aspects of this reality remain to be further discovered through unrelenting scientific research, to the potential benefit of education and of all of society.

References

Barchilon, J. Letters. Science, 1981, 212, 396.

Caruso, D. R., & Detterman, D. K. Intelligence research and social policy. Phi Delta Kappan, 1981 (November), 183-186.

Eysenck, H. J. The structure and measurement of intelligence. New York: Springer, 1979.

Eysenck, H. J. The sociology of psychological knowledge, the genetic interpretation of the IQ, and Marxist-Leninist ideology. Bulletin of the British Psychological Society, in press.

Jensen, A. R. Straight talk about mental tests. New York: Free Press, 1981.

Lewis, A. J. Making the public schools work: Urban education in the '80s. Focus, 1982, 9 (Educational Testing Service).

Lipovechaja, N. G., Kantonistova, N. C., and Chamaganova, T. G. The role of heredity and environment in the determination of intellectual functions. Medicinskie Problemy Formirovanija Livenosti, 1978, 48-59.